MILTON'S THEORIES CONCERNING EPIC POETRY: THEIR SOURCES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON *PARADISE LOST*

BY

RALPH WATERBURY CONDEE

A.B., University of Illinois, 1937

A.M., University of Chicago, 1939

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
ENGLISH IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS,
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MILTON'S THEORIES CONCERNING EPIC POETRY: THEIR SOURCES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON *PARADISE LOST*

The investigation into the reasons for *Paradise Lost* being what it is and not something else is fascinating, endless, and rewarding. One of the most fruitful lines of investigation is that concerning the nature of Milton's ideas of the epic, the sources of these ideas, and their effect on his poetry.

The greatest obstacle in studying Milton's epic theories is the absence of specific statements by Milton on the subject. The most explicit documents we have concerning Milton's epic theories are his two epic poems: *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained.* Aside from these, all we have from Milton are a few scattered scraps in his writings, and while we can piece these together to make a coherent statement concerning certain aspects of the epic, there are many dangers in this method.

I have, however, eliminated *Paradise Regained* almost completely from consideration, because it presents problems too different from those of *Paradise Lost* to be profitably investigated at the same time. In many ways the differences between the two poems are more important to an understanding of each than are their similarities.

Rather than trying to draw deductions from Milton's two epic poems, I have tried to project *Paradise Lost* against a background of the critical theories of those men of whom it can be assumed that Milton had some knowledge, hoping to clarify Milton's theories and changes of theory concerning the epic form.

One of the most important events in investigating Milton's epic theories is his change in plans. Early in his career as a poet, he indicated his intention of writing an epic poem with King Arthur as the hero. At the end of his life, he had written two epic poems, but he never wrote the Arthurian epic. The reasons for this change in plans are numerous, and among the most important are those dependent on the concept of form and on the formal rules which the critics, particularly the Italian critics of the century before Milton, laid down as essential to the epic.

Two questions arise in connection with this difference between what Milton planned in his youth and what he wrote in his later

years: first, for what reasons, and at what point in his career did Milton decide to write an epic on Arthur, and secondly, for what reasons and at what point did he decide not to? Implicit in the first question are two others—first, why write an epic rather than something else, and secondly, having decided to write an epic, why use Arthur as the hero?

In spite of the scarcity of specific statements by Milton on the subject, it is possible to reconstruct a set of doctrines in which Milton seems to have believed. By the time he was twenty years old, Milton was beginning to think seriously of writing epic poetry celebrating the deeds of superhuman heroes. In the following years he never abandoned the idea, while producing much other poetry in English as well as in Latin, Italian, and Greek, and while engaged in his furious controversial writings, both in Latin and in English.

Early in his life it was to history, and particularly to the history of England that Milton looked for an appropriate hero for his poem, and the figure of King Arthur was a prominent one in his youthful plans. The influence of Spenser's use of Arthur in the *Faerie Queen* must have been strong at this time. Here, Milton must have felt, was an ideal model — brave, generous, and patriotic, a hero in some ways bearing the relation to England that Aeneas bore to Rome. Arthur was known to most of the English reading public of the time, and yet he was a misty figure whose feelings and deeds were not so minutely recorded, that on the one hand the poet was cramped and on the other in danger of being called a falsifier of his nation's history. Here "the mind had room for the spacious circuits of her musings," and the poet could be called neither a mere versifier nor a liar.

In his thirties, when Milton felt that he was called on to demand reforms in the eccleciastical and political government of England, his poetic output slackened, and his projected epic on Arthur was abandoned, although he continued to plan for the future not only an epic but also a tragedy, perhaps on a British subject, perhaps on a Biblical subject; but no extended poem was to be consummated until there was no longer any outlet for his political activities.

It was not until 1667, when Milton was fifty-nine years old, seven years after the hated Stuarts had returned to power and over fifteen years after Milton had gone blind, that *Paradise Lost*

appeared. Nearly forty years had passed since his first poems (1628-1629) mentioning his hopes to write an epic. Over twenty-five years had gone by since he had last mentioned (in "Mansus," 1638-1640?) writing of "our native kings and Arthur." But his desire to write of Arthur and the Round Table was probably gone by about 1640, and any plans for such a poem were discarded forever. Indeed, he bluntly rejected the whole genre of poems which

> dissect
> With long and tedious havoc fabl'd Knights
> In Battels feign'd.

Undoubtedly many of the reasons for these changes were independent developments by Milton, but it is possible to see some of the causes which lie in the epic theorists and epic poets who preceded Milton.

We might compare Milton's position as an epic poet to that of a carpenter about to make a table, to borrow Plato's simile. The procedure for Milton, and apparently for most poets of that time, was to consider the best authorities and the best models in which he had been trained, much as the carpenter might examine the finest tables and the best blue-prints available. But the worth of the carpenter's product, beyond a certain limited utilitarianism, as Milton would have seen, is not established by a mere ability to follow the blue-prints slavishly and to copy with accuracy the other fine tables; rather it lies in the carpenter's ability to use these plans and models as his judgment teaches, departing from the patterns and the rules whenever necessary, "which in them that know art and use judgment is no transgression, but an enriching of art."

I have tried to suggest some of the many blue-prints and patterns which may have come to Milton's hand—the *Poetics* of Aristotle and the "Art of Poetry" of Horace; the commentaries on them by Robortelli, Castelvetro, and others; the critical observations of Minturno, Mazzoni, and Tasso; the remarks on heroic poetry made by the Pleiade; the models, the *Iliad,* the *Odyssey,* the *Aeneid,* and the later imitations of these poems; the romances of Boiardo, Ariosto, and Spenser. In most cases it is difficult or impossible to point to which of these may have suggested a particular characteristic to Milton; the only safe method is to consider them all as part of an enormous background of narrative

poems and critical theories concerning these poems, a background against which it is profitable to place *Paradise Lost.*

Of the many facets which appear when this is done, one of the most interesting is the effect of the theories of form on Milton's poem. The effect of these theories appears in such relatively inconsequential aspects as the opening formula, with its *principium* and *initium,* its *invocatio, exordium, and ianua narrationis,* in which it is possible to see the effect of centuries of epic poems, epic commentaries, and epic traditions on the opening lines of *Paradise Lost;* in more important matters, where Milton at the beginning of Book Nine explicitly rejects the martial tradition flowing from Aristotle and Horace through Servius, Cinthio, Scaliger, and Tasso, as well as the martial aspects of such highly praised models as the *Aeneid,* the *Iliad,* and the *Orlando Furioso,* Milton following instead the tradition of tragic poets like Quintianus Stoa and Ziegler, and epic poets like Sannazaro, Vida, and Du Bartas. This effect is clearly discernible in such fundamentals as the whole theory of forms originating in Plato, partially accepted and partially rejected by Aristole, and dominating philosophy and literary criticism down through Ficino, Ramus, Scaliger, and Minturno.

If we like, we can point out the inherent difficulties of such a theory of forms and the inconsistencies of the hypostatized absolutes which dominated Plato and his followers and Milton and his predecessors; but one must be careful in any conclusions he makes from Milton's adherence to this theory. Plato's carpenter and the author of *Paradise Lost* may believe in the existence of an ideal table form, and it is true that such a belief may be unfounded. But what also may be true is that the carpenter's completed table (whatever his beliefs concerning the existence of absolutes) may also be a table which men would use and admire for hundreds of years.

Only when we have seen *Paradise Lost* against a background of these theories of form, theories of epic poetry, and descriptions of minute epic characteristics, can we begin to see some of the elements which may have had their effect on Milton, first in turning his interest towards writing an epic poem, secondly in fixing his attention on King Arthur as a possible subject, and finally in causing him to replace Arthur and British history with the figures of Adam and Eve and the story of *Paradise Lost.*

VITA

Ralph Waterbury Condee was born in Chicago, Illinois, on January 11, 1916, the son of Ruth Hanecy and Ralph Waterbury Condee. He was educated at Shakespeare School and Hyde Park High School in that city. He attended the University of Illinois and the University of Chicago, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Arts from the University of Illinois in 1937. In 1939 he received the degree of Master of Arts from the University of Chicago. From 1942 to 1946 he served in the United States Naval Reserve as an ensign and as a lieutenant (junior grade) attached to the staff of the commander of the Southwest Pacific Fleet, and as a lieutenant with the Fleet Radio Unit, Pacific Fleet. On returning to inactive duty, he taught as an Assistant in English at the University of Illinois in the years 1946 to 1948. He married Norma Hauser Faricy in 1942 and has one son, Ralph Waterbury Condee III, born August 18, 1948.

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